

**Opening Statement  
Chairman Chris Smith  
Ethiopia's Troubled Internal Situation  
House Subcommittee on Africa,  
Global Human Rights and International Operations  
March 28, 2006**

Ethiopia, one of Africa's most populous and influential nations, has for centuries been the home to numerous diverse religious and ethnic populations. Last May, the East African nation held elections, which promised to be a big step forward for Ethiopia's democracy. The election process started out more open than previous elections, with the political opposition able to campaign more freely than ever before. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity presented for democracy closed in a wave of government harassment of opposition parties and ethnic hate speech on both sides.

Although there were other problems in the election process, the biggest issue was the delayed release of vote results. Preliminary results indicated that the opposition did much better than in past elections, increasing the number of parliamentary seats won from 12 to nearly 200. However, opposition party coalitions charged that fraud had been committed in many of the races they did not win. Because the government had failed to release results in the weeks after the election, suspicions rose that a victory by the opposition had been stolen.

The controversy surrounding the 2005 Ethiopian election is the result of a number of factors that created a "perfect storm" of political discontent that has created tragic conditions in Ethiopia.

The European Union election monitoring team reported serious irregularities, but its impartiality was questioned after the leak of a preliminary EU report which indicated that the opposition parties would win a majority in Parliament based largely on results in the capital city of Addis Ababa. Periodic statements released by the EU election team were then undercut by statements from EU diplomats, much as I experienced in my visit to Addis last August.

The Government of Ethiopia, by refusing to release all relevant information regarding the election in a timely fashion, created fear that the election had been stolen. International donors worked behind the scenes with the government to create a mechanism to resolve election disputes. However, that mechanism pitted the ruling party and the government-appointed National Election Board against the opposition parties. As a result, the opposition lost 90% of the challenges it filed, and the government missed its own July 8<sup>th</sup> deadline for release of election results, furthering the frustration and suspicion.

As for the political opposition, its leaders contributed to this crisis by failing to provide necessary evidence of election fraud in all too many cases. It isn't that this evidence may not have existed, but the parties appeared to be unprepared to effectively document what the problems were. Moreover, their refusal to take many of the seats won in the election prevented many issues from effectively being addressed in the Parliament, including the appointment of judges and guarantees of freedom of the press.

The suspicions regarding the election were exacerbated by the government's mass arrest of students in Addis in June. Protests were met with gunfire by government forces. It is estimated that as many as 40 persons identified as political activists were killed by government sharpshooters in the capital alone. Broadened arrests put tens of thousands in jail without charge or adequate contact with families or legal counsel. Further demonstrations in

November resulted in at least another 40 persons killed by government forces – this time including those not connected with the political opposition.

The recently-released State Department human rights report on Ethiopia is scathing in its description of what is taking place in Ethiopia, stating that “the government's human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas.”

Among the human rights problems reported by the State Department were:

- limitation on citizens' right to change their government;
- unlawful killings, including alleged political killings, and beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces;
- poor prison conditions;
- arbitrary arrest and detention of thousands of persons; particularly those suspected of sympathizing with or being members of the opposition;
- detention of thousands without charge, and lengthy pretrial detention;
- government infringement on citizens' privacy rights, and frequent refusal to follow the law regarding search warrants;
- government restrictions on freedom of the press; arrest, detention, and harassment of journalists for publishing articles critical of the government; self-censorship by journalists;
- government restrictions on freedom of assembly including denial

of permits, burdensome preconditions or refusal to provide assembly halls to opposition political groups, and at times use of excessive force to disperse demonstrations, and

- government limitations on freedom of association.

Approximately 16,000 people were released from jail earlier this year, but there is uncertainty about how many more prisoners remain behind bars without being charged or while awaiting a trial whose date is not yet set.

During my visit to Addis last August, I met with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and I asked him why he had not investigated the June shootings of demonstrators by agents of his government. His response was that the investigation might require the arrest of opposition leaders, and he didn't want to do that while by-elections were still scheduled. He went on to tell me that he had dossiers on all the opposition leaders and could arrest them for treason whenever he wanted. Thus, their arrests were all but certain even before the events that ostensibly led to their being incarcerated. Reportedly, the investigation of the government shootings of demonstrators is now belatedly underway.

The shootings by government forces and delayed investigation are reminiscent of an earlier incident: the massacre of Anuaks in southwestern Ethiopia beginning in December 2003 and continuing until May 2004.

The farming Anuak minority predominate the Gambella region of Ethiopia, but there have been periodic disputes with the highlanders, who are of the Tigrayan and Amharan ethnic groups. According to a Human Rights Watch report at the time, government forces joined with highlanders to kill at least 400 Anuaks in December 2003 alone and participated in the rape and torture of Anuaks. Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights

International confirmed the events described in the Human Rights Watch report.

The Government of Ethiopia announced last year that trials of government forces responsible for 13 of the Anuak killings had finally begun. However, there is no word yet on the result of these trials. While the government is engaged in such efforts, one hopes it also will investigate reports of the killing last year of 24 members and supporters of the Oromo National Congress and other allegedly politically-motivated killings by government forces in 2005.

Ethiopia has been an important ally of the United States in Africa, and the stability of one of Africa's most populous nations is critical to American policy, especially in the important Horn of Africa region. However, the violations detailed in the State Department human rights report and in other accounts of independent human rights organizations will only make this nation more vulnerable to civil war or a foreign-supported insurgency.

Yesterday, a series of explosions in Addis led to the death of one person and the wounding of three others in a blast on a crowded minibus. This is part of a wave of attacks that began in January and included three explosions earlier this month that wounded three persons at a restaurant, a market and outside a school.

America's commitment to promote the respect for human rights around the world demands that we examine the current situation in Ethiopia and that we prevail upon our ally to live up to its international human rights commitments while this situation can still be salvaged. The discussions the Government of Ethiopia is conducting with its political opposition and with our government are good signs that some positive movement is possible. Other humanitarian gestures, for example, the eye operation the

government reportedly authorized for opposition leader Hailu Shawal, are also an important step in the right direction.

However, the current situation calls for more than small steps taken slowly. If a crisis in Ethiopia is to be averted, reforms, investigations and trials must proceed with all deliberate speed. This is why we have convened this hearing today and why I have introduced H.R. 4423 – the Ethiopia Consolidation Act, which we intend to mark-up next week.

As I have said many times, “Friends don’t let friends commit human rights abuses.” This is a perfect example of why we must follow that dictum.